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Book review: "Booksprints in der Hochschullehre"

This review examines "Booksprints in der Hochschullehre: Schreiben lernen im Team" (2024), a volume that explores the use of booksprints as an innovative didactic format in higher education. The book presents booksprints as structured, collaborative writing processes that foster both academic writing skills and transferable competencies relevant to professional fields. While emphasizing writing as a means of learning, the authors also address the challenges of integrating booksprints into university curricula, including assessment regulations and group dynamics. The volume balances theoretical insights with practical guidance, offering materials for implementation. Despite some complexities in terminology and structure, the book effectively demonstrates the benefits of booksprints, particularly in enhancing student engagement, collaboration, and social integration. Ultimately, the review highlights the book's value for educators seeking to implement innovative and student-centered writing pedagogies.

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"Booksprints in der Hochschullehre"

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Abstract

This review examines Booksprints in der Hochschullehre: Schreiben lernen im Team (2024), a volume that explores the use of booksprints as an innovative didactic format in higher education. The book presents booksprints as structured, collaborative writing processes that foster both academic writing skills and transferable competencies relevant to professional fields. While emphasizing writing as a means of learning, the authors also address the challenges of integrating booksprints into university curricula, including assessment regulations and group dynamics. The volume balances theoretical insights with practical guidance, offering materials for implementation. Despite some complexities in terminology and structure, the book effectively demonstrates the benefits of booksprints, particularly in enhancing student engagement, collaboration, and social integration. Ultimately, the review highlights the book's value for educators seeking to implement innovative and student-centered writing pedagogies.

Introduction

The book "Booksprints in der Hochschullehre: Schreiben lernen im Team" [Booksprints in higher education: Learning to write in a team] (2024), published in German by wbv media, begins with a quote from a lecturer[1]

> *I don't believe that booksprints can be sold as a way to make thing easier for lecturers. They simply aren't. But they are definitely something for people who are interested in teaching formats, in didactic approaches, in opportunities to promote skills development among students on many different levels. For that, it is a really great format. (I.2) (p. 9)*

If you do not have time to read more about this book today, this sums up several important insights readers will take away from this book: "Sprint" does not mean that the main aim is to get your writing done faster than usual. "Book" does not mean that the outcome will necessarily be a book. But in this volume, the authors explain that booksprints are a worth-

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1   Direct quotations from the book have been translated from German.

while addition to established didactic formats in higher education because they provide not just a way of finishing a writing project but also convey transferable skill sets that are relevant for a variety of professional fields.

Booksprints are a form of collaborative writing which originated in the early 2000s. They use the idea of a sprint, a form of agile work developed in project management and software development, to bring a project to the finish line in a highly structured and efficient manner (Zennaro et al., 2007). Participants of a booksprint work according to a clearly defined timetable and clearly distributed and regularly changing roles towards the publication of a text. While the format is well established in fields such as publishing and various areas of the economy, the authors of the volume took inspiration from a few pioneering examples of booksprints in higher education and aim to establish it as a didactic format in university settings. They define such booksprints as

> *a format in which writers write a text*
> *together,*
> *over a short period of time,*
> *in different roles,*
> *in a strongly pre-structured manner,*
> *in an authentic writing arrangement. (p. 30)*

The authors address university lecturers (with or without prior experience in the teaching of academic writing) who would like to employ an innovative didactic format in higher education and at the same time promote their students' writing and project-related professional skills (e. g. agile work). While many aspects are similar to more established forms of collaborative writing, the highly structured approach and the clearly defined but evolving roles of the individual participants make booksprints a different and innovative format.

The book is divided into eight parts, the first five of which serve to theoretically conceptualize and embed booksprints in higher education. These five parts are followed by a bibliography as well as a handout and an appendix of materials for carrying out booksprints. The book thus serves both theoretical and practical needs, from fundamental considerations on teaching and writing in higher education to pre-formulated emails that can be sent to participants right down to the number of A4 sheets required per group.

In the introduction, the authors provide a contextualization of their volume and an initial orientation to booksprints against the backdrop of the current higher education context in Germany. Their aim is to "present booksprints as a didactic format that is intended to promote the aforementioned competences in different higher education contexts and can address the problems with its design […] and enable a transfer into different forms of higher education and discipline specific cultures" (p. 11).

The authors consistently emphasize the importance of writing as a means of learning. What sounds obvious to teachers of academic writing needs more explanations for others. And since the volume is not only aimed at the writing center scene but also at lecturers from

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other disciplines, they undertake a well-founded examination of the respective didactic principles both from the perspective of higher education and from the teaching of academic writing. The concepts of knowledge and competence are differentiated and placed in the context of the shift from teaching to learning, learner-centeredness is specified, but also critically assessed, and the authors reminds us of the great responsibility of teachers in didactic arrangements in higher education.

Learning in a university context always takes place within the framework of existing examination regulations, into which didactic innovation often cannot be easily integrated. In the context of booksprints, challenges can occur for instance in regard to graded/ungraded student assignments, and the authors provide suggestions and examples for solving such issues. They emphasize the potential of authentic, situated writing tasks which can become visible beyond the specific course and which can have a highly motivating effect. Reflection plays an important role here, as it can help turn irritation into productivity. Hitting a roadblock in our writing can be helpful in rethinking what we are trying to say. And writing, as the authors emphasize in this section, is also a wonderful means of reflection and thus of learning and expanding our skills. However, learning does not only take place through our own writing but also through looking at the texts written by others and through structured feedback. Often, what brings about an increase in competence for the students is not so much the work on one's own text, but insights from collaborative writing in the way that it is the norm in professional contexts.

Critical analysis

Booksprints are a highly ambitious format, and the project that this book takes on is as well. If a lecturer wants to organize a booksprint with these instructions, they need to spend a significant amount of time preparing and familiarizing themselves with the handouts and the terminology, which can be confusing at times. What is the difference between the roles of facilitator and project manager? When do the groups receive the group scripts, and which version of the master plan is displayed in the room? The wide range of material that the authors offer can be overwhelming in some places. Just one example: In order to understand the instructions given in the book, you need to know or look up terms such as HOC and LOC and the definitions of master plan, input or plenum that apply in this context. The authors' aim of presenting the complex subject matter at one glance runs into challenges here.

The volume is polyphonic, and the working method on which it is based leads to a special form of presentation. On the one hand, the book itself has been produced in a modified version of a booksprint; on the other hand, the authors emphasize that the volume has a collective authorship, that any sequencing of names would have meant a weighting, and that they all stand equally for all parts. This is a challenge for readers who are used to associating words with people, and to different criteria for attributing ideas in academic texts. The poly-

phony becomes particularly noticeable in chapter 4.1.3., Students (pp. 76–81), where student authors have their say and the tone of the text changes along with the perspective.

A few sections do not appear as part of a coherent narrative, which may be partly due to the fact that the book also represents the conclusion of a third-party funded project. For example, sub-chapter 3.3 on the SPRint project seems comparatively long, as the project had already been contextualized in the introduction. Some aspects appear in several places, such as the positive effects of the authentic learning setting, the definition of a booksprint, the explanation of handouts such as the master plan, or the conditions for success. There is a certain duplication in the material in their long and short versions: for example, in the master plan or the checklists (e. g. checklists 1, 3 and 7). While one could argue that many readers will not read the book from cover to cover but selectively (and this is explicitly desired!), this fact can also be seen as part of the concept. However, one could also say that a clear, maybe more directive approach in terms of the narrative by the authors could make booksprints in higher education even more attractive to a wider audience. It is indeed a great challenge to present the complex endeavor of a booksprint in higher education in a simple way. There might still potential here for further digital processing of the materials as an interactive, clickable or expandable version beyond the comprehensive collection of digital materials the authors already provide on twillo. Maybe the Schreibstationen material by Katrin Girgensohn (2023) can serve as an inspiration here?

Conclusion and recommendation

The strengths of the book outweigh the challenges. Time and again, the book focuses on the tension that arises between motivation through authentic, situated writing tasks and the resistances that make booksprints challenging: issues of examination regulations in higher education contexts but also tension that can arise in student groups, especially in collaborative and jointly assessed writing processes. In their explanation of how to overcome these issues, the authors successfully walk the tightrope between clearly naming and positively transforming these difficulties. When students wrestle with questions of fairness and workload, they prepare themselves for precisely such difficulties in professional contexts and can discover previously unknown potential in themselves, which is another important lesson from a booksprint.

The authors also explicitly emphasize levels in designing booksprints that are rarely highlighted so clearly in the teaching of writing: on the one hand, the conflicts and challenges; on the other hand, the importance of an emotional level on which "breaks, fun and celebrations" (p. 41) deserve their own sub-chapter. This also includes this realization: "The positive social effect that booksprints have cannot be overestimated in view of the fact that 40 % of dropouts state that they felt alone during their studies and that social integration is essential for successfully completing their studies" (p. 91). This effect was also emphasized by the participants of the booksprint discussed in this chapter in their final evaluation

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(p. 103). This social-emotional level plays a role in several places of this book and is reminiscent of discourses that Andrea Scott (2023) and Lisa Nunn (2021) address with their thoughts on relationship-rich learning and campus belonging.

For all the extra work that booksprints do entail, all of the lecturers involved agree on one thing: "that the texts by the students who took part in the booksprint were better than those of students who did not write their texts as part of a booksprint" (p. 84). To return to the beginning: Yes, it is a lot of work and yes, it is a complex task – but all in all it is worth it. Anyone who would like to integrate an innovative teaching format into their course will find practical guidance in this book.

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